

Royal Institute of Philosophy

The Subjection of John Stuart Mill

Author(s): David Stove

Source: *Philosophy*, Vol. 68, No. 263 (Jan., 1993), pp. 5-13

Published by: Cambridge University Press on behalf of Royal Institute of Philosophy

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3751061>

Accessed: 08-04-2018 12:42 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



Royal Institute of Philosophy, Cambridge University Press are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Philosophy*

The Subjection of John Stuart Mill

DAVID STOVE

'There is no opinion so absurd but that some philosopher has held it.' Cicero wrote this around 44 B.C., and even then he was only repeating a saying already current. The reputation of philosophers for holding absurd opinions is therefore very old. Equally undeniably, it is also a well-founded reputation.

Still, Cicero's saying is not literally true. There are plenty of absurd opinions which no philosopher has ever held. An example is, that the intellectual capacity of women is on the whole superior to that of men. I assume that this opinion will be admitted to be an absurd one; but what philosopher, ancient, medieval, or modern, has ever held it? Since, in a lifetime largely spent in reading philosophers, I have never heard of one such, I venture to affirm that there is none.

More surprisingly, the same is true of the opinion that the intellectual capacity of women is equal to that of men. At least, the same is true as far as the public utterances of philosophers go. There is not a single passage, intended for publication, in any philosopher that I know of, in which the intellectual equality of the two sexes is asserted. *A fortiori*, I know of no passage in which a philosopher has argued for, as distinct from merely asserting, that opinion. (I should however add, since I cannot claim a close acquaintance with the feminist philosophy of the last twenty years, that I am speaking of philosophers up to about 1970.)

A philosopher who did believe the equality theory, (as I will call it), is John Stuart Mill. He is the only one that I know of, and even Mill's belief in that theory is something which can only be learnt from his letters and diaries. He never defended the equality theory, or even asserted it, in anything that he wrote for publication. From time to time, indeed, he gave in print some hint that he subscribed to that theory; but he gave no more than hints.

If there is one place where Mill might have been expected to maintain the equality theory, it is his book, *The Subjection of Women* (1869). Indeed, as one reads that book, one keeps thinking that it will, that it must, contain a defence of the equality theory. But it does not. It does not even contain an assertion of that theory.

This unwillingness to defend the equality theory in print may have been creditable to Mill's common sense, but it was fatal to the argument of *The Subjection of Women*. The book is meant to show that women

should be on the same footing as men in law, government and society; and Mill's argument for that conclusion was, almost without remainder, from premises of an empirical or factual kind. He could not, of course, being a Utilitarian, argue from any supposed 'natural right' or 'human right' to equality: the kind of thing that Bentham had called "nonsense on stilts". Nor did Mill rest his argument on the 'principle of utility': he was emphatically not preaching to the converted here. His argument in this book was essentially an argument from psychological and historical *facts*, or at least alleged facts. In sum, it was from the alleged fact that there is *no known difference* between the sexes, of a kind or degree that there would need to be, in order to justify the legal and other disabilities under which women lay in 1869.

Mill's argument absolutely demanded, therefore, that he maintain that there is no such difference between the sexes in their *intellectual* capacity in particular. But this, as I have said, is what he consistently refuses to do.

As a result, he is exactly like a runner in a race who arranges for himself to be delivered at the starting-line bound hand and foot. Mill is entirely at the mercy of those tyrannical and brutal husbands who populate his pages so thickly. For almost the first thing they would have said, of course, was that the disabilities imposed upon women were justified by the pronounced intellectual inferiority of their sex. What reply could Mill have made? He admitted, as everyone does, that intellectual inferiority, (of children to adults, for example, or of sub-normal men to normal ones), can be a sufficient justification for unequal treatment; and he *would not* assert that the two sexes are equal in intellectual capacity. So here, for once, John Mill would have had no answer to John Bull.

Since Mill believed the equality theory, why would he not have maintained it in print, if he had thought he could make a good-enough case for it? I have not been able to think of any answer to this question. It is not as though the intellectual equality of the sexes was in his time an unmentionable topic (like contraception), or even a dangerous one (like economic equality). I therefore think Mill must have realized that he could not make a good enough case for the equality theory. But if that was so, then he believed that theory on grounds which he himself recognized to be insufficient.

The best ground, and a very good ground, for believing that the intellectual capacities of men and women are *not* equal, is this: the inferiority, which is both general and pronounced, of the intellectual *performance* of women in the past. Mill, of course, acknowledges this inferiority as a fact, but he is far from allowing it the weight which it deserves. He retains a robust belief in what might be called the 'externalism' of the 18th century Enlightenment: the belief, that is, that

The Subjection of John Stuart Mill

human beings are made what they are by their external circumstances. Accordingly, he thinks that the inferior intellectual performance of women in the past can be explained, or near-enough explained, by the circumstances in which women in the past were placed: by the inferior education which they received, by the obstacles which were placed in the way of their pursuing an intellectual career, and so on.

Still, Mill does not put complete trust in externalism. No doubt he had been warned against doing so, by the gross absurdities which externalism had led earlier Enlightened thinkers into: the belief of William Godwin, for example, that human ageing, senescence and death, are due entirely to 'mistaken institutions'. Accordingly, Mill does not say, what thoroughgoing externalists must say, and did and still do say, that there is simply no such thing as the nature of women. What he chose to say instead was this: that it is and must be altogether *unknown*, so far, what the nature of women is, and what on the other hand is due to their education or other external influences. And Mill makes this assertion, of our total ignorance about this matter, no fewer than five times in the course of this short book.¹

This assertion was absolutely original, as far as I know. Still, Mill would have known that it would be a welcome one to many of his readers. On hearing the blessed message that *more research is needed*, what liberal heart does not expand? What liberal job prospects do not expand? But the same assertion was, of course, unwelcome to some other readers, and especially to the feminists. For they were decidedly of the opinion, even in 1869, as they have been ever since, that more research is *not* needed into the nature of women; just more change in favour of women. And at that, if you grant the feminists their premises, it would be unreasonable to expect from them any other attitude; just as it would be unreasonable at present to expect black Americans to welcome more research into the comparative intellectual capacity of different races.

But setting aside all consideration of the welcomeness or otherwise of Mill's assertion, the assertion itself was plainly incredible. After all, human beings have known, for a very long time, quite a lot about the nature of female horses, dogs, cattle, sheep, goats and birds, and about what, by contrast, is due to their domestication or other external factors. By 1869 a great deal was known, at least to some people, about the differences between the sexes even among barnacles, insects, and flowers. The differences in the nature of the two human sexes form a subject far more interesting than any of those, and the materials for the

¹ See *The Subjection of Women* (M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1970). p. 22, p. 24, p. 27, p. 57, p. 68. (All my references are to this edition of Mill's book.)

study of it are much more easily available. That this subject remained a closed book to John Mill, we can easily believe. But it is utterly impossible to believe that, by 1869, no one whatever had picked up even the least little bit about it.

Yet that is what Mill says, over and over again: ‘. . . I deny that anyone knows, or can know, the nature of the two sexes, as long as they have only been seen in their present relations to one another.’² Although he here says ‘present’, he undoubtedly meant ‘present or past’. Enlightenment may have been very incomplete in 1869, but all Enlightened persons understand that every earlier age had been more benighted still.

The proposition, that no one yet knows anything about the nature of the two human sexes, might have been thought sufficient to satisfy even a philosopher’s appetite for absurdity. But it was not enough to satisfy Mill’s. For he proceeds to improve upon this performance, by twice actually contradicting this proposition, in the course of the very same paragraph as that in which he asserts it. I will give the relevant quotations in a moment.

Suppose we were asking about the nature of a certain kind of physical object, the X’s. And suppose that the question were, more specifically, what the natural or proper *shape* of an X is; whether it is spherical, or a disk, or like a bullet, or what. Then someone would contradict himself if he held that no one knows anything about the natural shape of X’s, but also claimed to know that certain particular X’s have been pushed *out of shape* by something or other. The contradiction is very obvious: too obvious to make a detailed analysis of it worth the trouble. It would be even more obvious if this man, who denies that anyone knows the natural shape of X’s, were to claim to know that *every* X so far seen, every past or present X, had suffered serious distortion of its natural shape. Now, however unlikely it may seem, Mill’s self-contradiction was of this very kind; as the following passages show.

Standing on the ground of common sense and the constitution of the human mind, I deny that anyone knows, or can know, the nature of the two sexes, as long as they have only been seen in their present relations to one another. [Omitting Mill’s next sentence, the paragraph continues as follows.] What is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing—the result of forced repressions in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others.³

In the second passage, not even one sentence separates Mill’s two incompatible assertions. ‘. . . as I have already said more than once, I

² P. 22.

³ P. 22.

The Subjection of John Stuart Mill

consider it presumption in anyone to pretend to decide what women are or are not, can or cannot be, by natural constitution. They have always hitherto been kept, as far as regards spontaneous development, in so unnatural a state, that their nature cannot but have been greatly distorted and disguised . . .⁴.

An inconsistency so very glaring must often have been pointed out before. I have never seen it pointed out in print, but then I am no specialist in Mill-studies. It would hardly deserve being pointed out at all, of course, if it were an isolated lapse of Mill and of no one else. But that is the very opposite of the real case. Feminists, at any time, are and must be profoundly externalist, profoundly anti-biological. At the present time, almost all of them go so far in this direction as to reject the very idea of the nature of women. Yet all feminists, at all times, remain convinced, just as Mill was, that the subjection of women to men is *unnatural*.

Mill certainly did not believe that our ignorance of the nature of women is incurable. On the contrary, he expected that it would begin to be dispelled quite soon. That was to be one of the effects of those 'experiments in living', whose proliferation he had passionately advocated in *On Liberty*, (1859).

Mill was never very explicit as to what these 'experiments' would consist in. We know that they all turned upon novel arrangements between men and women about sex and property. We can also be confident that they were much more ladylike and small-scale than the 'experiments' with property and sex which were then being urged upon Europe by certain other people; Marx and Bakunin, for example. But having said this much, one has said all that can be said with confidence about them.

Whatever Mill's 'experiments' were, why did he expect them, or some of them, to reveal the nature of women? In the past, men and women have made enormously varied arrangements concerning sex and property, and even at present very different arrangements as to those matters exist in different parts of the world. All these different arrangements are quite as much entitled to be called 'experiments in living' as any other arrangement about sex and property which the future might bring to light. Yet according to Mill, every one of these earlier 'experiments' had effectually concealed or distorted the nature of women. Why, then, did he suppose that some future ones would *reveal* it?

Indeed, how *could* they reveal it? How are we supposed to tell, if and when the *natural* relations between the two sexes are hit upon at last? Did Mill think that when, some time in the future, somewhere, men

⁴ P. 57.

and women finally got things right, the birds and bees would let the whole neighbourhood know, by spontaneously clapping their wings? Presumably not. All right: but how *are* we supposed to tell?

In fact, of course, there is no quick way of telling what is natural in human life, and only one slow way. That is, to observe what are the features of human life which are present always and everywhere, and which survive even the most determined efforts to extinguish them. Many such features are already known. One of them is, the bearing and the nurture of children: work that is done mainly by women. Another one is, the protection of and provision for women and children: work that is done mainly by men. Another is, a certain degree of territoriality. Another is, a certain amount of inequality or social subordination. Another is, a certain amount of private property. And yet another one is, a certain degree of subordination of women to men.

Mill raises the obvious question why, if the two sexes do not differ in intellectual capacity, there has been no female Shakespeare, da Vinci, Newton, or Mozart? But this difficulty, as I said earlier, does not weigh upon him very heavily. The external circumstances of the two sexes were probably different enough in the past, he thought, to reconcile this awkward fact with the equality theory. But there was a smaller question of the same kind which did, Mill confessed, present him with a certain difficulty. This question concerned painting and drawing. For these were arts which many women, over several preceding centuries, had been not merely at liberty, but actively encouraged, to pursue. Why, then, did their achievements still fall, even here, far below those of men?

To swallow a camel and strain at a gnat is ridiculous even to a proverb. Yet in itself, of course, Mill's little question is a perfectly good one. It also shows that, even on the subject of women, his usual fair-mindedness did not desert him completely. His answer to this question, however, is worse than ridiculous; it is embarrassing. The answer he gives is this; that in the past, the women who painted or drew had all been - - - - - *amateurs*.⁵

One takes a deep breath on reading this. Why, so they had been, near enough. But what a place for a philosopher to end his explanation at! Surely Mill might have been expected to press his enquiry at least a little further. *Why* have the women who painted or drew been all, or nearly all, amateurs? The answer to this question is exceedingly obvious, indeed painfully obvious. It is the same reason why almost all of us are amateurs, in almost all our activities; painting, fishing, writing, carpentry, growing vegetables, or whatever it might be.

⁵ See p. 72.

The Subjection of John Stuart Mill

Namely, that no one, or next to no one, thinks well enough of our productions in that line, to offer us money in return for them.

Mill made a number of valuable contributions to philosophy. But nearly all of them were of a most unusual kind, in that they were involuntary. They consisted in his *making an important mistake clearly*. They were therefore like the involuntary contributions to geography which were made by early navigators, when their ships foundered on previously-uncharted rocks.

The example which is most famous, and deserves to be so, is the mistake about what is desirable and what is desired, which Mill made in the third paragraph, chapter IV, of *Utilitarianism*, (1863). Here he said, though the fact is scarcely credible, that what is desirable stands to what actually is desired, just as the visible stands to what is seen, and the audible stands to what is heard. As though 'desirable' meant '*can be desired*', or 'visible' meant '*ought to be seen*'!

Another famous example is in his *Logic*, (1843), in answer to Hume about induction. Hume had asked, in effect, how learning from experience is possible; how it is possible, for example, rationally to infer anything about the future from the past. For most of the very long Book III of his *Logic*, Mill managed to keep his temper with this question, although it is, indeed, a most absurd one. But in the twenty-first chapter his patience finally ran out, and he exasperatedly says (in effect) that we learn *from experience* that it is possible to learn from experience: an answer whose unsatisfactoriness Mill himself scarcely attempted to disguise.

A third mistake was a little less obvious, and accordingly waited eighty years to be detected. This is Mill's saying that the inference from 'All European swans are white', to 'All swans are white', 'cannot have been a good induction, since the conclusion has turned out erroneous.'⁶ As J. M. Keynes pointed out, the rule implied here is altogether too severe; at that rate, no scientific theory whatever, as long as it is finally found wanting, could *ever* have had good inductive evidence in its favour.⁷

All of these were real and valuable contributions to philosophy, for all that they were involuntary. I wish I could feel sure of having done, even involuntarily, a tenth as much as Mill did for the instruction of future students of philosophy. Most mistakes in philosophy are either not important, or are not made clearly enough to enable the mistake to be detected. But L. T. Hobhouse spoke the truth, and bestowed very high praise on Mill, when he said that Mill, like all other philosophers,

⁶ *Logic*, Book III, ch. III, §3.

⁷ *A Treatise on Probability* (London, Macmillan, 1921), 267–268.

made mistakes, but that, unlike most others, he wrote in such a way that it was possible for his mistakes to be found out.⁸

The central mistake in *The Subjection of Women* is entitled to take its place alongside the ones just mentioned. The mistake I mean is the conjunction of 'I know that subjection of women to men is unnatural', with 'The nature of women is quite unknown, or else there is no such thing'. For here, as in the three other examples I have just mentioned, Mill simply expressed clearly an absurdity which millions of other people had expressed only obscurely, or not at all.

The Subjection of Women is ridiculous and discreditable in very much the same way as John Milton's pamphlets on divorce; and its genesis was of essentially the same kind as theirs. First, there is a man of strong intellect, weak sexual impulse, and a measureless confidence that the world is due to be reformed by his writings. This man has not previously taken any marked interest in marriage, divorce, or the domestic economy of sex: subjects which, it must be admitted, for all their importance in daily life, possess very little intellectual interest. But then something happens which, in each case, is an affront to two immensely powerful forces; the self-importance of adult males, and the vanity of authors.

Mr. Milton's wife, an unfortunate girl of seventeen, (which was less than half his own age), flees his house after a month of marriage. Nor can she be by any means prevailed upon to return to it, until her Cavalier father's financial incompetence, and the fortunes of the Civil War, compel her to return, as the only way of avoiding outright destitution. Mr. Mill, for his part, forms an intimate though non-sexual connection with a certain Mrs. John Taylor, the wife of a successful businessman and the mother of several children by him. As a result Mill finds, to his chagrin, that certain doors in London, which had previously been open to him and to her, are closed to both.

Are these not cosmic cataclysms? Are these not mortal wounds? Well, no, of course not: nothing like. Affronts on this scale to masculine self-importance occur a thousand times every day, all over the world, and always have done. But when such an affront is given to a Milton or a Mill, authors and reformers not merely by profession but by obsession, great effects *must* flow from these tiny causes.

Because young Mary Milton will not promptly return to her obedience, all Christendom must learn the new 'doctrine and discipline of divorce' which her husband, by a lucky chance, or rather, by the scrupulous care of an infinite Providence, first wrote during their

⁸ I read this statement, somewhere in Hobhouse's writings, long ago. But I have never been able to find it again. I would be grateful to anyone who can supply the reference.

The Subjection of John Stuart Mill

honeymoon, and soon has in print. Because John Mill and Harriet Taylor are snubbed by some London hostesses, European civilisation ought to agree to dissolve itself into innumerable, indefinite, and open ended 'experiments in living'. A deluge of ink descends, a Vesuvius of arguments erupts: arguments Scriptural, empirical, moral, metaphysical, arguments historical, 'comical-historical, pastoral-comical'—but most of them just plain comical, like the ones in *The Subjection of Women*.